

The Catholic Succession



After Richard Cromwell's resignation, the republic slowly fell apart and Charles II was eventually invited to resume his father's throne. In May 1660, Charles II entered London in triumph. The monarchy had been restored.

Charles II was an intelligent but deeply cynical man, more interested in his own pleasures than in points of political or religious principle. His lifelong preoccupation with his many mistresses did nothing to improve his public image.

The early years of the new king's reign were scarcely glorious ones. In 1665 London was devastated by the plague, while a year later much of the capital was destroyed in the Great Fire of London.

The Dutch raid on Chatham in 1667 was one the most humiliating military reverses England had ever suffered.

Nevertheless, the king was a cunning political operator and when he died in 1685 the position of the Stuart monarchy seemed secure. But things swiftly changed following the accession of his brother, James, who was openly Catholic.

James II at once made it plain that he was determined to improve the lot of his Catholic subjects, and many began to suspect that his ultimate aim was to restore England to the Catholic fold.

The birth of James's son in 1688 made matters even worse since it forced anxious Protestants to confront the fact that their Catholic king now had a male heir.

Soon afterwards, a group of English Protestants begged the Dutch Stadholder William of Orange - who had married James II's eldest daughter, Mary, in 1677 - to come to their aid.

The Restoration of the Monarchy

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When Cromwell died in 1658, his son took his place. Richard Cromwell lacked his father's leadership abilities, though, and his government collapsed. Eventually Parliament reconvened and voted to bring back the monarchy—an event known as the Restoration.

In the spring of 1660, Parliament invited the son of the dead Charles I, also named Charles, to be the new king. Parliament laid out certain conditions, which Charles accepted, along with the invitation. He would be crowned King Charles II. As he rode into London upon his return, the people shouted their good wishes. The writer Samuel Pepys recorded his impressions of the day in his diary:

“Great joy all yesterday at London, and at night more bonfires than ever, and ringing of bells, and drinking of the King's health upon their knees in the streets, which methinks is a little too much. But every body seems to be very joyfull in the business...”

—The Diary of Samuel Pepys, May 2, 1660

The Reign of Charles II Charles knew that as king he had to watch his step. When his policies were opposed, he usually gave in. Still, he had to address many issues. Conflict with the Dutch continued. Religious tensions remained. And the role of Parliament was still being developed. Charles supported religious toleration for Catholics, for example, but Parliament insisted upon laws to strengthen the Church of England.

The Restoration years were a mixture of positive and negative events. On one hand, Charles reopened the theaters, with a flowering of English drama as the result. Another positive event was passage of the Habeas Corpus Act of 1679. This act guaranteed that someone accused of a crime had the right to appear in court to determine if the accused should be held or released. The act is one of the most important in English history.

England also suffered setbacks during the reign of Charles II. In 1665 the bubonic plague returned, killing perhaps 100,000 people in London alone. The next year, the Great Fire of London destroyed large parts of the city—but also killed the rats that had spread the deadly plague. After the fire, though, Charles supported public construction projects.

James II Later in Charles's reign the question of who would succeed him remained. His brother, James, was next in line, but he was Catholic. In addition, James had married a Catholic princess whose Catholic son would outrank James's Protestant daughters from his first marriage. When Charles died in 1685, James II was crowned king. Many people wondered if another destructive war would follow.

James was not popular. Besides being a Catholic, he believed wholeheartedly in his right to rule as an absolute monarch. The English people, however, would no longer tolerate such a belief.